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Getting the most from the intelligence

By Allan E. Goodman

President-elect Reagan is right to make improved performance by US intelligence an early priority. But he should keep in mind that intelligence failures often mask more fundamental policy failures.

Since 1960 there have been 17 so-called intelligence failures. They range from the judgment that Francis Gary Powers' U-2 would not be shot down in 1960, to the assessment by the CIA's Board of National Estimates in 1962 that the Soviet Union would not deploy offensive missiles in Cuba, to the failure to predict the radicalization of OPEC in 1970, to the underestimation of the potential for revolution in Iran. Each alleged failure has been the subject of exhaustive study by the Congress, academic specialists, and investigative reporters. Each post-mortem inevitably raises the question: "Had the intelligence community been right, would the policymaker have listened?"

Both intelligence officers and foreign policy officials have made errors of judgment about the events and trends contributing to US reversals over the past decade. It now appears that there has been an underestimation of such things as the capability of the Soviet military-industrial complex, the willingness of Moscow to support armed intervention in Africa, Southwest Asia, and Latin America, and the radicalism of key countries in the third world. Such blindness to a basically hostile environment is well on the way to being cured (and this trend would have continued regardless of who was elected last November).

But what also needs to improve is the overall relationship between intelligence and foreign policy.

Perhaps more than any other recent president, Ronald Reagan could have a decisive impact on this relationship. His administration will no doubt oversee the design of a new legislative charter for the intelligence community. The scope of congressional oversight and the span of control now exercised by the director of central intelligence (DCI) are two issues, in particular, on which a Reagan administration will probably leave a significant mark. Mr. Reagan will be the only president, moreover, to have a former DCI as vice-president.

However, what also requires repair is the way presidents use intelligence. So here are some suggestions for the President-elect on how to get the most from intelligence:

• Don't be misled by thinking that performance will improve through reorganization.

While it is time to rethink the concept and role of the DCI as a presidential adviser, the intelligence community has been in an almost constant state of reorganization since James Schlesinger abolished the Board of National Estimates in 1974. The community is depleted of senior managers (who retired or resigned in frustration); those who remain are jaded about the real impact of, as one put it, "whimsical chairs." Other countries reorganized their intelligence service only in the wake of hostile penetration. This has not yet happened in the US, and there is much that is effective about the way things are set up now.

• Don't ask the DCI for details on every coup or crisis that occurs during the night. The analytical ranks of the intelligence community today are the same size as a decade ago. But their reporting responsibilities have substantially increased in scope and complexity. Leave spot reporting to the State Department.

• Do continue to ask for regular oral briefings by the DCI. This was started by Admiral Stansfield Turner and it did more to inform a new President of the challenges he faced and the consequences of his actions than any series of transition papers or background memoranda.

• Do offer feedback on what you get. Let

the intelligence professional know what was good and bad about what was provided. When President Carter wrote his famous note to Admiral Turner, Secretary Vance, and Dr. Brzezinski deploring the quality of the political intelligence he had been given on Iran, it was too late. To have had impact, the critique should have been rendered much earlier. Keep your DCI clued in, moreover, to what you are most worried about achieving (and failing to achieve), especially in the context of meetings with foreign leaders where so much of foreign policy is actually made.

Ronald Reagan faces an extremely complex and dangerous international environment — and with America in a weakened state. Intelligence can help to expand US options and power; it can give policymakers the time to counter adverse trends or anticipate and ameliorate their impact. But the quality and usefulness of such intelligence depends as much on how well presidents listen as on the professional competence and morale of those who provide it.

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